

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The question of character has surely been with us as long as writing. Now as always its discussion is already impeded at the outset with an impasse likely never to be resolved: what we ask of our characters in literature we would never dream of imposing on ourselves. The indirections and promiscuities selected, even demanded by our language in order for its most characteristic qualities to be realized would be, acted out, disastrous to the social and psychological fabrics of our lives. We ask, and have always asked, our literary characters as figments of language to dramatize, intensify, subject themselves to, triumph over, or be destroyed by the very qualities and actions that empower the dynamics of language. Literary characters may be construed as embodying the very power and success of language as a signifying system and a medium of transference.

Can we not situate the scene of tragedy as a genre at the place where the very success of language as a medium of distribution and absenting verges upon the disaster that these qualities wreak within the domain of sociopsychological experience? The moment at which the fate of the characters achieves the certainty of a machine that will not be impeded is exactly the moment at which the script reaches a certain level of cohesion, self-reference, and efficiency as a system of meaning. The power and exemplarity of the tragic character is precisely tantamount to his or her centrality to a language system and to achieving conditions of absolute impossibility within the existential sphere.

Literary characters are, then, culture's Sirens, who both teach us the music of music and the poetry of poetry, and who sing us toward the verge of moral and psychological dissolution. They characterize an impasse; an impasse is their essence and nature. It is not we who, after all the time in which characters have been crystallized and forgotten, are about to resolve this tension, this ambivalence, about language and about ourselves.